



**(Washington, D.C.)** - When the House voted last week to adopt an amendment to the defense authorization bill that would empower President Obama to remove all Army brigades from Europe, it set up an intriguing debate as a Senate committee begins to write its own version of the measure.

The Obama administration earlier this year proposed removing two of the four combat brigades from Germany and Italy as part of a larger strategic shift.

The House amendment — by Colorado Republican and war veteran Mike Coffman — would finish the job. It would allow Obama to eliminate the permanent forward bases for the remaining two brigades and replace them with troops that could rotate in and out, eliminating the need for family housing and other longer-term facilities.

There are no firm estimates on savings, which would depend on whether the brigades are eliminated or moved stateside.

Coffman also would halt a Pentagon plan to allow families to join troops in deployments to Korea. Building infrastructure to support family members during those deployments could cost \$13 billion over the next decade, he estimates. Coffman, during the Armed Services Committee markup, secured a provision that would continue to block, pending submission of reports, any spending on new infrastructure to support the proposed changes in tours.

These actions signal the rising importance of fiscal issues in the national security debate. The move to significantly reduce a longstanding overseas deployment in Europe, in particular, came despite the opposition of not only the Pentagon, but also the GOP leadership of the House Armed Services Committee.

Only a year or two ago, the amendment probably would have failed, and Coffman acknowledged he was surprised at his victory. Indeed, an amendment to last year's authorization bill (PL 112-81) that would have cut by more than half the U.S. troop levels in

Europe failed resoundingly, 96-322.

The actions on this year's bill (HR 4310) also manifest growing bipartisan impatience with relatively meager European outlays on defense. The United States is spending a considerably larger share of its wealth on the Pentagon, even as the federal debt mounts and the Pentagon proposes closing bases in the United States.

At the NATO summit in Chicago, tensions over that imbalance have been an irritant.

The amendment begins with this statement: "Congress finds that, because defense spending among European NATO countries fell 12 percent since 2008, from \$314 billion to \$275 billion, so that currently only 4 out of the 28 NATO allies of the United States are spending the widely agreed-to standard of 2 percent of their [Gross Domestic Product] on defense, the United States must look to more wisely allocate scarce resources to provide for the national defense."

### **Support From Democrats**

Rep. Jared Polis, D-Colo., who cosponsored the amendment, put it this way during the debate: "At a time when we must seriously consider cuts to our budget and balancing our budget, we should not continue to subsidize the defense of wealthy European nations against a Soviet threat that ceased to exist two decades ago."

Coffman and Polis prevailed, 226-196, mainly on the strength of Democratic votes, but with decisive help from 63 Republicans. Coffman had to spar on the floor with two senior Armed Services lawmakers from his own party: Michael R. Turner of Ohio and J. Randy Forbes of Virginia.

"The Army has moved already very strongly by removing two of these combat brigades from Europe," said Forbes. "They've reduced by 50 percent the number of personnel we have in Europe since 2003. I think we should listen to the Army and make sure that we're allowing them to do what they think at this particular point in time is strategically and from a cost-effective basis in the best interest of the United States."

The Obama administration's budget proposal would eliminate two of the four brigades in Europe from the Army's active force structure, on top of six other brigades being eliminated. Coffman's amendment is silent on whether the Army should cut the brigades or move them elsewhere, and he says he wants to leave that decision to the Army.

In fact, the provision does not require anything, only stating that the president "is authorized and requested" to take the last two brigades from Europe.

There are about 79,000 U.S. troops from all of the U.S. armed services in Europe, including about 40,000 from the Army. The amendment in the House-passed bill would allow the Pentagon to subtract about 15,000 soldiers, plus a yet-to-be-determined number of support personnel.

Each member of the armed forces in Europe has more than one dependent, on average. Those family members drive up the requirements for housing, schools and services. Rotational troops, by contrast, would not bring their families, so the infrastructure associated with them would be less.

Senate Armed Services subcommittees begin to mark up their version of the policy bill on Tuesday. And Coffman says he will begin to talk to them soon about his provision.

“It would be great if we got it in the Senate version,” he said. “I hope the House vote is respected.”

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